Chapter III

Research Setting
In the Calcutta metropolis itself out of the total population of 8.3 million, more than a quarter live in slums. There are many more unrecognized slum cluster huts. During three months of monsoon, leaking roofs and damp mud floors force many to stand in ankle-deep-water, clutching babies under rags in a bid to keep them dry. This means even more diseases.

The origin and growth of these Calcutta slums are attributed to a variety of circumstances. The demand for labour force is the first and foremost reason for the growth and development of these slums in Calcutta.

Calcutta has its own economic potentiality. It is one of the major commercial centres of India and the second largest populated metropolis. It was the capital of British India till 1911. This area grew up as an urban complex in the 18th century. Industrialization and fast expansion of the cities caused heavy influx of labourers from rural belts. Establishment of jute factories on both sides of the river Ganga in the neighbourhood of Calcutta around the middle of the 19th Century, Coal and Indigo industries in and around Calcutta attracted the poor. This led to the concentration of migrant population. Construction of railways facilitated large scale migration of population from distant places, which also supplemented concentration of population in and around Calcutta.
For over a hundred years this port city is elaborately linked by roads and railways with its massive hinterland. The surface communication link is extended almost all over India. Periodic famines and great riots brought the destitutes from rural areas to Calcutta. All these led to the rapid growth of the city's population. The rapid development of industries with hardly any provision to accommodate the poor rural immigrants and also natural growth of population caused sprouting of these slums. Chowdhury (1996) believes that slums of Calcutta are long established tenancy settlements, nearly as old as the city itself. Commencing with the development of Calcutta Port and the rise of the Jute and Engineering Industries over 100 years ago bustees came up in poorly developed lands adjoining factories and other employment centres. The huts, usually have mud walls and tile roofs in the shape of a guardrangle partitioned into many rooms built by middle men or Thika tenants who had taken the lands on lease from the land owners. The bustee dwellers themselves were the tenants of the middle men who owned the huts. Unfortunately the industry that flourished in Calcutta and its management were of 19th Century vintage, unaware or unconcerned about housing or social welfare. Thus as industry grew so did the slums.

Beliaghata is situated on the eastern part of Calcutta near to Sealdah Railway Station. Slums of this part of the city are situated on the bank of a filthy almost chocked natural canal known as Beliaghata Canal which mainly serves as drainage. It was an inland part and mart of the Salt Lakes nearly a century ago. The name Beliaghata probably means a sand-packed "belay" or "belia"
jetty rather than a paved one; but it might have been derived from "bhauliya" or "baules", a type of boat that resorted there in large numbers.

Beside the migrants from rural belts a huge influx of uprooted population from Bangladesh came to Beliaghata in research of shelter and job. These people with their lost social and economic moorings founded a new social environment totally different from what existed in their own native land. The traditional system of social control by age-old village panchayets, caste panchayats pertaining to their native places are totally absent in the slum.

As far as could be gathered the Beliaghata slums came into being in early 18th Century when some workers settled in the locality in search of jobs as labourers and porters.

Beliaghata slums cover a big area consisting of corporation wards 33, 34 and 35. The research paper is based on the data collected from two slums namely Rambabur Bagan and Gour Dey Garden of Ward 34 with a total population of 34948 (1991). The ward is extended over an area of 201.6 acres. It has all along been within the Calcutta Corporation since its inception. This ward is bound on the north by Dr. Ramesh Mitra Lane and Abinash Sashmal Lane, on the east by Hemchandra Naskar Road and Gagan Sarkar Road, on the south the Beliaghata Canal and on the west by Kankurgachi Road and Raja Rajendra Mitra Road. Two busteens are divided by a road which has a link with Belighata Main Road. Most of the huts are low dilapidated structures of brick wall and corrugated iron
sheets with tile thatched roofs. Huts are built in close proximity to each other in a haphazard manner, ill-ventilated. The floor of the huts remains wet and humid in the absence of proper light and air. In many cases tiled roofs leak rainy water during monsoon. Majority of the families live in single small dark rooms with damp floors which serve all the purposes of a household. The same room is used as kitchen and dinning space for all members of the family. Very few have kitchens in adjoined space, very few families own land in these slums. Very few are double storied structures. The basic amenities for clean living are not available. Municipal tap water and latrines are inadequate. Total population of the two slums is 1221, i.e. 3.5 per cent of the total population of the ward no. 34. Total no. taps, latrines in these slums are 59 and 64 respectively. In average 20.69 persons share a single water tap and 19.07 persons use one latrine. Flow of water is time bound and low. The community latrines built by the state governments are in very bad condition. Out of the 227 families, 210 families live in a single room apartment and the remaining 17 families live in 2 to 3 rooms. The rooms are quite unfit and unsafe for human habitation. The average living space per individual is extremely limited and there is hardly any privacy for the married couple. Very few people possess water tap within their homestead. In majority of cases, municipal taps are located considerably away from the homes. Long queues are seen during supply hours in front of every such tap. It is disturbing spectacle. There are frequent quarrels and mutual abuses. There is no covered bath even for the females. There are two ponds in the two bustees. Although the water of the
two ponds are highly contaminated. People use them for bathing and washing utensils. Absence of proper drainage and sewerage system cause dirty water logging. Overflowing drain's water not only floods the lanes but in many cases enter the living room adding to the general insanitary condition. The low lying areas get water logged especially during the rainy season. Few available dustbins are not properly used. Garbage is seen here and there. Refuse are thrown into the drains or left on the streets. Municipal sweepers dump the refuse into the drains and children usually use them as latrines. Children defecate in the drains just out side their homes. The rotting refuse in the overflowing dustbins remains uncleaned for days and weeks together presenting a horrible sight and smell. Arrangement for cleaning the lanes and streets and the removal of garbage is miserably poor. This result in spread of diseases such as dysentry, cholera and malarial fever among the populace. The women in the slum are ignorant about child care. Food is not prepared in a hygienic manner and remains uncovered for hours. Unhealthy, polluted atmosphere, prevail in almost all parts of the slum. Lack of elementary amenities cause distressing condition, combined with the vicious cycle of poverty. In absence of proper means of livelihood and basic amenities the atmosphere of tension and conflict is getting worse day by day. The poor do not find any improvement in their living conditions. There exist veiled prostitution in most parts of the slum but a part of its is known as prostitute area. Use of sub-standrad language and abuses are common and a typical features of the slum. There is high incidence of unrestrained deviant behaviour, crime, drunkenness,
illegitimacy, intra family maladjustments and frictions. People suffer from grinding poverty, tension, chaos and animosity. It is an area of disintegration and disorganisation. The entire atmosphere of the slum presents a sub-human, gloomy picture.

Thus the characteristics of slums as defined by Desai and Pillai, Hunter, Anderson, Bargel, Marshall and others time to time as substandard housing, overcrowding, congestion, absence of facilities, or basic amenities, insanitary and unhygienic condition, poverty illiteracy, darkness, despair, squalor and wretched living conditions prevail in these two slums in Beliaghata.